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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of the cluster system operating at Oakton Community College (OCC) is described in this paper along with changes that have occurred in the system over the past few years. Part I describes the social, political, and educational environment in which the philosophy of the cluster system was forged. Additionally, this section identifies the critical elements of the philosophy as the student development model, interdisciplinary courses and programs, diversity in instructional modes, emphasis on community, and organizational provisions for growth and administrative effectiveness. Manifestations of the cluster philosophy during its first years at OCC are described next, including the Directory of Courses and Sections; the role of the cluster dean in guiding, supporting, and evaluating faculty, as well as in administrative functions; the use of student development counselors as teaching faculty; biweekly meetings of cluster faculty; a non-punitive grading system; emphasis on innovation; and the breaking down of traditional barriers between students and faculty. Part II begins by relating the external and internal changes influencing the implementation of the cluster system at OCC, focusing on enrollment increases, greater proportions of part-time students and faculty, and staff turnover. Finally, responses to these changes are reviewed, such as decreased emphasis on innovation, more formal student-teacher relations, and greater attention to administrative work by cluster deans. (HB)

The Cluster Philosophy and its Manifestations at Oakton Community College

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Oakton Community College is one of a handful of community colleges organized on a cluster system rather than on the more traditional departmental or division system. The purpose of this paper is to describe critical elements of the cluster philosophy so that we share a common understanding of its tenets.

Board members, faculty, and administrators in traditionally organized colleges rarely examine or question the principles of that organization; they simply assume that discipline-based groupings of faculty are the logical order, though queries about which departments or divisions are strongest or most effectively may be raised. At Oakton, however, because the structure is atypical, queries about effectiveness, cost and strength force examination of the basic organizational philosophy.

This paper is neither an indictment nor a defense of the cluster system, and it is not designed to measure reality compared to theory. Part I describes the social, political, and educational environment in which the philosophy of the cluster system was forged, then identifies critical elements and manifestations of this philosophy. Part II discusses changes in the environment and within Oakton through the 1970s. Manifestations of the cluster philosophy as they now exist are then described.

This is not a literature review in any formal sense. However, existing articles about the cluster system were used to provide background and to aid in the recall of nearly forgotten ideas which shaped Oakton. A list of these references is included at the end of the paper.

PART I

Social, political, and educational environment

Oakton College was formed in 1969 and opened its doors to students in the fall of 1970. During its first two years more than 125 faculty and administrators were hired. Though from a variety of backgrounds, philosophically (if not personally,) most had been affected by the three critical events influencing higher education in that time: the civil rights movement, Vietnam War, and Kent State shootings. Together these events impelled us to examine the standard ways of organizing higher education. Old assumptions about the proper roles for students and faculty were discarded, and even basic goals for higher education were rewritten.

At Oakton a number of perspectives on higher education, students, teaching, and learning evolved. Among them, seven stand out as particularly forceful in shaping the cluster philosophy. Briefly, they are:

-- Students were right in rejecting traditional academic subjects and calling for courses "relevant" to them, courses which examined rather than simply accepted and repeated middle-class, white males' views of the world;

-- Students should participate in, not just be the recipient of, college decisions affecting all aspects of their lives as students;

-- High schools taught rigidly defined subjects in structured classrooms, stifling students' creativity and opportunities to shape

their own studies and develop self-awareness and confidence;

-- Students learned in a variety of ways, and each student could discover by what means s/he learned best. To force all students into a common learning mode, e.g. lecture-discussion, was to perpetuate an educational disservice;

-- Faculty were most effective as partners in a learning process with students; their role was to "respond, assist, to value, and to provide options for students" (Irlen, "Responsive Academic Structures");

-- Departments bred rigidity and competition among faculty and prevented them from focusing on students;

-- Given sufficient time, virtually any student could learn any subject, especially if class material was broken into small segments accompanied by immediate testing, review, and feedback.

These seven perspectives, colored by the experiences of the civil rights movement, Viet Nam, and Kent State, shaped the philosophy of the cluster system. Other perspectives can probably be added to these seven as observers recall the emotionally charged atmosphere at colleges and universities during Oakton's infancy. What emerged from these views was a philosophy of education and organization embodied in the cluster system. It is to this philosophy we now turn.

Elements of the Cluster Philosophy

The cluster philosophy at Oakton has five critical elements. These elements are: the student development model, interdisciplinary courses and programs, diversity in instructional modes, an emphasis on community, and the organizational structure to capture and facilitate these.

The student development model. The student development model emphasizes the interrelationship of cognitive and affective learning and of intellectual and personal development (Helfgot, 1975). The development of the total student is stressed, with the student himself--his/her goals, desires, concerns, and talents--viewed as a legitimate topic of inquiry. The student's needs are placed foremost, and both emotional and cognitive growth of students are viewed as appropriate objectives for courses and programs. Each student is valued as an individual, and courses and support services are tailored to meet individual needs. Thus an informing principle of the cluster philosophy is an "unabashed concern for the individual student" (Irlen, 1974).

Interdisciplinary courses and programs. A second major component of the cluster system is a rejection of traditional boundaries between disciplines and an emphasis on "learning for living", irrespective of formal subject-matter groupings. This is formalized in the clusters. Faculty from a variety of disciplines, vocational and baccalaureate, are joined within each cluster. This has several effects.

Disciplines cross-fertiilize each other, and artificial barriers to knowledge are broken down. Occupational faculty are given new stature by no longer being isolated into vocational--in other places read as "second class"--departments. Disciplines do not compete with each other, since most disciplines are represented in every cluster. And student needs remain in the spotlight as faculty devote themselves to sharing and implementing new approaches to their subjects, sharpened by interactions with colleagues from diverse fields.

Diversity in instructional modes. That students learn in a variety of ways, and that not all faculty teach best in the same style, are accepted as givens in the cluster philosophy. Thus the cluster philosophy fosters diversity in teaching approaches and encourages faculty members to experiment to find their own best styles. Similarly, students are presented with clear choices among teaching formats for the same course and can select those course sections in which the teaching is most compatible with the student's optimal learning style. Standard lectures are discouraged, and teaching methods which involve students in shaping their own classes are emphasized. These techniques support focusing on the student rather than the teachers, and provide the student with a sense of ownership and, hence, commitment to his/her own education.

Emphasis on community. Each cluster comprises a "mini-college" with which faculty, staff, and students identify, although in a commuter institution in which student turnover is large it is very difficult for students to develop an understanding of or attachment to a cluster. Through faculty discussions about teaching and learning within the cluster, and because each cluster contains representatives from so many disciplines and programs, each cluster can evolve and develop its own identify. Each cluster can, if it so chooses, emphasize a particular teaching approach, and clusters are the vehicle through which special interdisciplinary pairing, tripling, and even quadrupling of courses occur.

Organization. In addition to facilitating a sense of community, a student-centered approach to teaching, and special courses and programs, clusters serve a distinct organizational purpose. They encourage growth

without a loss of humaneness and personalism. That is, as enrollment and the size of the faculty grow, new clusters can be added so that the basic administrator: faculty: student ratios remain the same. Because these numbers are stable, clusters are able to remain responsive to individual needs of faculty and students, and to meet new demands as they arise. Moreover, cluster systems are said to be administratively leaner than department/division systems and therefore help reduce overhead costs for the college (Heerman, 1974). This material benefit of the cluster system enhances the philosophical values the system promotes.

These five elements of the cluster philosophy are mutally supportive. Indeed, one could redefine these elements into different categories, but at root they are essential to the cluster system as it was instituted at Oakton. However, an understanding of the theoretical base of an organizational and educational system is incomplete without a complementary understanding of the manifestations of the philosophy in practice. That is, one might agree that the above philosophy is appealing, but the question remaining is "what difference does this make in practice?" The final section of Part I provides a number of illustrations of how the cluster philosophy was manifested in policies and practices at Oakton during the first years of the college.

Manifestations of the Cluster Philosophy

A major manifestation of the cluster philosophy was the Directory of Courses and Sections, a publication in which each full-time faculty member, and each part-time faculty who taught on a regular basis, described each course s/he taught. Descriptions included the teaching method, assignments,

texts, examinations, and the grading system. Using the Directory a student could register for instructors and course sections in which the teaching approach was most compatible with the student's learning style. Preparation of course descriptions for the Directory served a secondary function as well; it provoked discussions regarding teaching and learning strategies and methodologies, what works and what doesn't. The Directory description served as a kind of "contract" between the student and the instructor so that both were clear about what each could expect from the other.

A second manifestation of the cluster philosophy was the role of the cluster dean. Each cluster was headed by an administrative generalist, a dean, who guided, supported, and evaluated faculty in the cluster, in addition to performing routine administrative functions such as hiring faculty and scheduling classes. Because the dean was not locked into promoting a narrow discipline, the dean was able to emphasize the integration of disciplines and actual teaching and leaning processes which foster the total development of the student.

A third illustration of the cluster philosophy in action was the special place of the student development faculty (counselors). Rather than being shunted to a centralized counseling center separate from teaching faculty, student development faculty were teaching faculty, and they were assigned to clusters both to add to the interdisciplinary nature of the cluster and to facilitate a sense of community and caring within the cluster. Student development faculty taught credit courses, most often a psychology course, Psychology of Personal Growth, and they advised and counseled students. They worked with colleagues from other disciplines in the cluster to help them

evaluate their teaching and to understand students as whole persons rather than merely as subject-learners. Student development faculty also used their special skills to facilitate the development of group cohesion and a sense of identity within the cluster.

The course, Psychology of Personal Growth, is another example of the cluster philosophy. Formerly called the Human Potential Seminar, this course satisfied the interdisciplinary course requirement for earning a degree at the college. Its subject matter was the student himself; readings and discussions helped students meld theory and textbook information and their own experiences to enhance self-awareness of their goals and abilities. At times this course was paired with another, more traditional college course--e.g., communications--so that skills such as writing were taught, while the subject matter of the writing was the individual student.

Cluster meetings, biweekly meetings of faculty in a cluster, were to be devoted to discussions of teaching and learning, new strategies for enhancing student growth, and the development of special programs and courses. These meetings offered faculty opportunities for sharing their successes and understanding their difficulties in a supportive atmosphere of colleagues committed to the same goals. The dean planned these meetings with cluster faculty.

A sixth manifestation of the cluster philosophy was the nonpunitive grading system adopted at Oakton. Because the student was perceived as intrinsically valuable, and because it was accepted that individual students may need more than a traditional term in which to master course material, and to provide students with the opportunity to learn from mistakes rather than to

be forever burdened by them, Oakton did not fail students. Rather, a student who did not complete assigned coursework in a given term received an X, an incomplete, and had the subsequent term to make up his work. Should the work not be completed, or should a student's quality of classroom work be deficient, the student was given an R. The R signified that no credit was earned in the course, but was not calculated into the student's grade point average nor did it appear on the student's transfer transcript. The student had lost time and tuition, but was not dogged by the stigma of failure. As part of the growth and development of a student, a "second chance" was thus made available.

A seventh illustration of the cluster philosophy was an emphasis on innovations in and around the classroom. Independent study, tandem and triad courses in which sections in separate disciplines were linked by a common focus and shared faculty; off-campus courses taught in the work-place, in other areas of the country, or abroad; courses available on television or through the newspaper; and credit for competency as assessed by examinations were some of the innovative teaching approaches available to Oakton students.

An eighth, and certainly not final, example of the Oakton philosophy at work was more mundane, but equally important. Faculty broke down traditional barriers between students and teachers. Casual dress, the use of first names, and an open-door atmosphere encouraged students to seek out faculty, and faculty to remember they were facilitators of learning rather than simply purveyors of information.

The cluster philosophy of Oakton Community College is complicated. It blends traditional notions of education and work with a humanistic approach,

concern for the individual, willingness to experiment, acceptance of the value of all disciplines and courses of study, and a focus on students and their development. The philosophy was developed during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when racial justice, equal opportunities, war, and participatory democracy and governance were foremost in students' minds. Today, in 1982, other concerns seem paramount. The next part of this paper identifies changes which have occurred externally and within Oakton and assesses the extent to which original manifestations of the Cluster system exist and are practiced today.

PART II

Part I of this paper described the environment within which Oakton was formed, the cluster philosphy intrinsic to the institution, and manifestations of the cluster philosophy. By the middle 1970s changes in external economic, political, and educational stimuli affecting Oakton had occurred. Changes within the institution mirrored these. Personnel and geographic shifts in the late 1970s and 1980s magnified the effects of these changes and together these alterations in Oakton's internal and external environment fostered modifications in the manifestions of the cluster philosphy. Part II describes external and internal changes influencing Oakton and discusses changes in cluster philosophy manifestations.

Environmental and internal changes

The end of the Vietnam War, the oil embargo in 1973, and increasing rates of unemployment and inflation were among the major factors shifting students' focuses to vocational programs and occupational goals by the middle 1970s. Some argue that the socially-conscious student activists of the 1960s and early 1970s were replaced later in that decade by a quiescent student body interested only in fostering their own careers and pleasures. The label "me-generation" was often applied.

Another explanation is equally compelling, yet has received far less attention. Students in the 1970s were much like their counterparts of the 1960s in responding to external cues, except that in the 1970s the environment within which students matured had changed. Social justice, war, and equal rights were replaced in the headlines by concerns of unemployment, inflation, and personal fulfillment. In response to these issues, students in the seventies turned away from liberal arts and sought pragmatic curricula to prepare them for increasingly scarce jobs--to guarantee not only their employment, but financial access to the "good things" in life. Flower children were replaced by young adults wearing designer jeans, and business degrees were desired rather than equated with support for defense spending, war, and discrimination.

Changes in the environment affected adults as well. Returning to school became common as individuals sought to update obsolete technical skills, fill increasing amounts of leisure time, and prepare to make career changes. At

the same time colleges recognized that declining numbers of 18-22 year olds in the population would require them to find new types of students to survive. Marketing to adults, colleges began offering flexible course scheduling, encouraged part-time enrollment, increased evening offerings, and located extension centers in convenient suburban areas. Growing numbers of part-time older students on campus changed the complexion of schools. These students frequently balanced employment and family responsibilities with school and had minimal interest in participating in student organizations or taking advantage of co-curricular activities.

Another factor affecting higher education in this period was the recognition that may high school graduates were deficient in basic writing, reading, and mathematical skills. Declining ACT and SAT scores and increasing numbers of remedial courses, even in highly selective colleges, were two obvious indicators of this phenomenon. This fact, accompanied by dissatisfaction with college curricula broadened in the late 1960s and early 1970s, generated a movement to increase general education and graduation requirements. Student freedom to simply select courses with little regard to course sequencing or basic skills development grew limited.

Economic changes also affected higher education during this period. Double-digit inflation pushed up operating costs of colleges and universities and forced them, in turn, to raise tuition and fees. However, such raises were not sufficient to meet increased costs and many schools had to impose severe cost reductions, including releasing untenured faculty, cutting programs, deferring building maintenance, and postponing building and remodeling projects. Financial exigencies were particularly severe in small

independent liberal arts colleges, though by the 1980s economic distress at the state level began to affect state colleges and universities as well. The job market for college instructors was almost nonexistent and there was an oversupply of teachers in most fields.

Changes within Oakton occurred also during this period. One change was the substantial growth in student enrollment: From 2330 students in the fall of 1971, Oakton's student body grew to 5537 in the fall of 1975 and 8639 in the fall of 1981. The percentage of full-time students in the student body fell from 59% to 29% in that period. Most part-time students attended Oakton to take one or two selected courses; they were not interested in taking advantage of programs the college believed would foster their development affectively as well as cognitively, and they spent little time at the school outside of classes. Moreover, each fall some 50% of students were new to the college, additional evidence of the difficulty in implementing a philosophy based on the development of personal relationships among student and faculty. There were simply too many students for faculty to know, and students did not stay around long enough to develop close ties to each other or faculty and staff.

Growth and change in the student body was paralleled by changes in the faculty as well. In the fall of 1971 there were 73 full-time and 43 part-time faculty; 63% of the faculty were full-time. By the fall of 1975 the ratio had shifted, and only 49% of the 242 faculty were full-time. In 1981, of the 416 individuals teaching credit courses, only 34% were full-time. Half of all courses were taught by part-time faculty, most of whom came to campus only to teach and had little understanding of or contact with the cluster philosophy.

Though the number of clusters had grown to five, each dean was ostensibly responsible for hiring, supervising, and evaluating more than 50 part-time instructors, some of whom taught for only one or two terms before leaving the college.*

Growth in the size of the faculty was only one change affecting instructors. Another factor was lack of mobility and limited opportunities to move elsewhere or within the institution. Teaching jobs grew scarce, and faculty who had come to Oakton expecting to stay for only a few years found themselves with no career alternatives. Rather than experiencing a continual infusion of new people with new ideas and enthusiasm, Oakton found itself with a stable and aging faculty. This was common in colleges in the late 1970s and 1980s, but was particularly troublesome for an institution founded on the principle of innovation and the constant generation of new ways of teaching and facilitating learning. Though frequently discussed, no coherent programs or policies for helping rekindle faculty commitment and confidence have emerged.

Two other events internal to Oakton were crucial in affecting the cluster system at the close of the decade. One was a complete turnover of deans within a two-year period. Because deans are most directly charged with implementing the cluster philosophy, this turnover meant that a whole new corps of individuals had to learn the role of cluster dean. This required

*Faculty coordinators were assigned the direct responsibility of recommending and scheduling part-time faculty. In vocational programs coordinators were also responsible for evaluating them; a job description for baccalaureate coordinators has not been adopted by the board, and their responsibility in these areas is more ambiguous.

learning both how to handle routine administrative matters and how to work in a system of overlapping responsibilities and dual (to two vice presidents) reporting. The second event having impact upon the cluster syste was the separation of the college to two locations. Cluster deans were separated by 10 miles, and frequent informal faculty and staff meetings, key to the cluster system, were no longer feasible. The 1980 North Central Self-Study Report describes in some detail the effect of this separation on the college.

These external and internal changes fostered revisions in the implementation of the cluster philosophy. Many of these modifications occurred without discussion or clear decisions; practices simply evolved to meet changing student demands, growth in the student body and faculty, and changing faculty interests. The literature on innovation is consistent in its findings that periods of intense change and innovation are followed by periods of consolidation and review, and that the high energy needed to impell changes cannot be sustained indefinitely. This period of quiescence occurred at Oakton, but it was not overtly recognized. The language and philosophy of the school continues to call for investments in innovation and intense concern for students.

In the next section the status of manifestations of the cluster philosophy identified in Part I will be reviewed. Such a description will, of necessity, focus on the general practice at Oakton. Not everyone will perceive these manifestations in the same way. Thus what follows is intended as a brief outline of what is now the common practice at Oakton, but it recognizes that no single description can capture the diversity of what is happening.

Changes in the Manifestations of the Cluster Philosophy

The Directory of Courses and Sections continues to be published. The Spring 1982 Survey of Students conducted by the Office of Research found that a substantial number of students who use the Directory found it of value; other studies and impressions of those working at registrations, however, suggest that the time a course is offered is the most important criterion for a student selecting a section, with the location and need for the course being secondary considerations. The large number of part-time faculty who do not write directory descriptions and last minute changes in teacher assignments make it difficult for a student to rely on the Directory to select course sections. Currently possible changes in the Directory are under review. The inclusion of one general description of content for a course, with each instructor providing information about teaching style and assignments, and a biannual publication schedule, are being considered. These changes would reduce costs and promote similar content for all sections of a course.

The role of the cluster dean remains the same in theory, although in practice it appears that deans are devoting more time to administrative concerns and less time to evaluating and working with faculty than was originally theorized. The logistics of working with 100 or more individuals some of whom teach on another campus, are overwhelming. Help, in the form of a faculty member given the equivalent of two courses of released time, is now available to the deans. It has not been determined whether this is sufficient or what other types of relief might by appropriate. The deans and vice presidents perceive that changes are needed, but they are not in agreement about what these changes should be.

The student development faculty (counselors) continue to be assigned to clusters. They report to their respective cluster deans and to the vice president for Student Development through the Director of Student Development Services. This dual reporting appears to work most of the time, though it is not clear who has authority to resolve conflicts. Since these individuals teach only two classes per term, and carry out their other responsibilities under the purview of the vice-president for Student Development rather than deans directly, there remains some confusion on the part of other faculty regarding the role of student development personnel.

Psychology of Personal Growth continues as a three-credit course which meets the interdisciplinary requirement for an Oakton degree. It is transferable as an elective to some, though not all, schools to which Oakton students commonly transfer. The course draws high enrollments, though its maximum class size -17- makes it among the more expensive baccalaureate courses to teach. In theory this course is a key in the student development model, for its purpose is to focus on the students themselves as the content of the course and to promote students' abilities to identify their own strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Thus, in addition to earning three credits in psychology, students should emerge from the course with clearer understandings of themselves and their futures. While there is general agreement about these course objectives, little empirical work has been done to assess outcomes of the course or to compare students who have taken Psychology of Personal Growth with similar students who have not taken it.

Cluster meetings continue to be scheduled biweekly. Each dean and faculty set their own agenda. For a time, cluster agenda and minutes were circulated among deans and administrators, but this practice ceased some three years

ago. Though there are variations among clusters, it appears that more cluster meetings are devoted to administrative business of the college, and fewer to teaching, learning, interdisciplinary concerns, and the developing and implementing of new programs and special courses, than was intended. Attendance at cluster meetings is voluntary, and faculty differ in the priority they attach to these meetings.

The nonpunitive grading system remains in place. Occassional concerns are raised about it, particularly the advisability of continuing the policy of no E grades, but there appears to be no pressing demand for a review or revision of the system.

The language of innovation persists at Oakton, which explicitly claims to be an innovative institution. Two realities, however, reduce the accuracy of these claims. One is actually an indicator of the success of innovative education; many new concepts of the late 1960s and early 1970s have been adopted by institutions and are now regularly available. For example, credit by examination, weekend courses, media-based courses (television and newspapers), and off-campus courses are offered by many colleges and universities. What was once new and daring is now relatively routine. Innovations have become conventional. The other reality is that Oakton is no longer offering the kinds of tandems, triads, and content-focused semester programs it once did. At least three reasons account for this: shifts in faculty interests away from such courses, diminishing student demand, and reduced administrative support. It is difficult to determine which, if any, of these is the primary cause of this phenomenon. Probably the three reinforce each other.

The final manifestation of the cluster philosophy described in Part I, a casual faculty that promoted informal student ties, has also changed. Though hardly a formal institution, Oakton is no longer a college where faculty insist on being called by first names and go out of their way to blend with students in dress and behavior. And while faculty continue to be open to student's requests for help, they also are not averse to withdrawing to their offices to work. In Des Plaines, particularly, faculty offices are physically located in alcoves, poorly identified, and dark. They are not easily found or welcoming.

The above, it must be recalled is a general updating of the cluster philosophy as it operates. Many will argue that more, or less, of the original spirit exists than is portrayed here. Moreover, a cataloging of behavior is only part of the story; the elan, spirit, energy, personal investment, and concern which pervaded Oakton in its early days cannot adequately be portrayed and while policies remain intact, most will agree that the atmosphere and dedication is no longer the same. This is not a criticism. Oakton has matured, its external environment has changed, and characteristics and demands of students are not what they were twelve years ago.

A college's organization grows out of its educational philosophy. At Oakton the organization and philosophy--the cluster system--are merged.

Whether this merger is necessary, and whether it remains effective and at least minimally efficient, are questions cutting to the core of the institution. They cannot be addressed lightly or casually. Should an assessment of the cluster system be undertaken, the possible consequences of the assessment to the philosophy and fabric of the institution must be understood at the beginning.

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